

Mobile devices and learner interaction inside and outside the classroom.

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In the last decade, mobile technology has proliferated in the hands of language learners. Most have a mobile phone and many also bring to the classroom other portable devices, discretely using them as dictionaries, messaging systems and search tools. An observer might wonder why, despite having quite powerful mini-versions of the classroom PC and interactive whiteboard in front of them, the learners are not working with their devices more openly and collectively. Is it because their incorporation would be at odds with the here-and-now activity of many language classrooms? This presentation explored the tensions between mediated interaction and group language learning and suggested that learner interaction may take place around rather than through the devices and applications.

Background

In the presentation, I used the term Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) to refer to mobile devices, applications and related activities. There is a small but growing body of research on mobile devices and learner interaction in the language classroom. In their survey, Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) observe that ‘the activities ... rarely allow for collaborative learner interaction’ (Kukulska-Hulme and Shield 2008). The vast majority of applications are text-based, product-oriented, and characterized by more formal contexts and one-way Teacher – Learner interaction. In contrast, uses that promote process-oriented communication and interaction are characterized by less formal contexts, and Teacher / Learner – Learner interaction in which learners define their own learning or provide materials to other learners (see Table 1).

MALL	Product-oriented learning materials	Process-oriented communication and interaction activities
Context	more formal	less formal
Interaction	teacher–learner	teacher/learner-learner
Typical learning situation	learners study alone	learners define own learning / provide materials to other learners
Problem	text-based	existing opportunities for collaborative learner interaction are rare

Table 1: Comparison of MALL applications and activities

The few exceptions identified in Kukulska-Hulme and Shield's (2008) survey illustrate the mobile affordances identified by JISC (2005), i.e. the enabling of interactive learning and fieldwork evidence gathering. Mapping the various MALL activities onto Bowers' (1980) model of learner interaction and teacher involvement in the language classroom (Figure 1), it is clear that the majority of MALL activity, while offering feedback, occasions no genuine interaction, while the scant process-oriented activities encourage unmonitored interaction.

<div> Direct teacher involvement </div>	1 Teacher presentation	2 Teacher / student question and answer	3 Class conversation and discussion	4 Teacher / student conversation	5 Interpersonal group with teacher as member
	6 Dictionary Cooney & Ceogh (2007) Supervised individual seatwork	7 Headway Class and group drills and exercises	8 Voices JISC (2005) Problem-centred group activity	9 Twitter Communication games	10 Shakespeare Free dramatisation and role-play
	11 Vocab learning, quizzes & surveys Haiku Individual self-access study	12 Pemberton et al (2010) Ogata & Yano (2003) Individual self-access study with interactive (audio) support	13 Lan et al (2007) Wise Judge Controlled simulation and role-play	14 Business interviews Student / student conversation	15 Turkish news Ros i Solé et al (2010) Interpersonal group without teacher as member
<div> Indirect teacher involvement </div>	<div> Whiteboard photo Tree photo </div> <div> No genuine interaction </div> <div> Genuine interaction </div>				

Table 2: Learner interaction vs teacher involvement (based on Bowers 1980)

Reflection

As an EAP teacher experimenting with MALL, I wanted to encourage my foundation-level students to socialise because they often worked alone, adopted a passive learning style, and seldom used English outside the classroom. Together, the MALL activities I tried tick all the boxes in Bowers' model and go beyond it. The activities could be categorised as student-initiated or teacher-initiated, inside or outside the classroom. Inside, I asked learners to use their mobile phones to do the following:

- photograph themselves in tableaux from four of Shakespeare's tragedies;
- tweet messages in character from Davis and Rinvolutri's running dictation *The Messenger and the Scribe*; (3)
- access the University blackboard via the campus wireless network; and
- surf the web for answers to general knowledge questions posed in their course book, *Headway Academic Skills* (OUP).

The results suggested that MALL encouraged these learners' creativity, enabled social relationships, permitted repeat attempts, and fostered self-confidence.

I asked new learners to go outside to do the following:

- record audio interviews with local business people;
- photograph themselves in tableaux from *The Messenger and the Scribe*;
- roam the campus and photograph unusual architecture to accompany their own haiku; and
- record audio interviews with passers-by on campus and upload the results to the application Woices.

Despite occasioning a great deal of negotiation when uploading the results, in discussion afterwards it became clear that learners felt self-conscious about approaching strangers and using the TL, they expected to face rejection, and they did not want to use recording devices.

Learners' spontaneous use of mobile devices was both utilitarian and subversive. Inside the classroom, they photographed board work for later upload to their web-based blackboard site; checked the pronunciation of unfamiliar words; and watched rolling news in their first language on web-based media channels. Outside, as we were walking between classrooms one day, one learner took a dramatic photograph of the felling of a healthy sycamore tree in the centre of campus; back in the classroom it formed the basis for a lively discussion on ecology. It is these spontaneous learner uses that go beyond Bowers' model.

Comment

Balancing the affordances and constraints of MALL, it is ironic that the unique strengths of the technology - its portability and social interactivity - may be a disincentive for some learners. While MALL provides a lifeline for the shyer learner, it breaks the pattern of teacher-dominated classroom discourse, and learners from some cultures might find that discomforting. It seems that only by encouraging its use on learners' own terms can the disincentives be overcome, and learner-produced material harvested outside the classroom provide a resource for group-based learning inside.

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References

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